



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## THE MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY OF GREEK DIALECTS

BY ROBERT J. BONNER  
The University of Chicago

In an article on the "General Linguistic Conditions of Italy and Greece" (*Classical Journal* I. 94) Professor Buck incidentally expresses the opinion that "all dialects were mutually intelligible for purposes of simple communication, and most of them in the case of more extended discourse." No one, I think, will challenge this conclusion, for the story of the "Ten Thousand Greeks" makes it evident that a miscellaneous body of soldiers of fortune, recruited from every part of Greece, did succeed in communicating freely and easily with each other. My present purpose is merely to test this view by assembling the evidence furnished by literature of the fifth and fourth centuries B. C. This involves the limitation of the discussion to linguistic conditions prevailing in Athens.<sup>1</sup>

The part played by public speech in the business and pleasures of Athens made even the ordinary citizen unusually critical and sensitive in matters of speech. Errors in grammar or pronunciation, incorrect use of words, a foreign accent, and even a loud voice were extremely distasteful. Athenians were particularly intolerant of the linguistic shortcomings of citizens of non-Hellenic extraction.<sup>2</sup> These prejudices were due, in large measure, to their contempt for barbarians, and probably did not extend to Greeks, who spoke their own dialects before public bodies in Athens.<sup>3</sup> Aliens of Hellenic stock resident in Athens soon acquired the local idiom and were not to be distinguished from native-born Athenians.<sup>4</sup> Of the actual

<sup>1</sup> Naturally Professor Buck confined himself mainly to epigraphical evidence.

<sup>2</sup> Considerable numbers of ex-slaves were admitted to citizenship at various times. For example, Pasion and Phormion, prominent Athenian bankers, were both freedmen (Dem. 45. 80-82).

<sup>3</sup> "Perhaps you have supposed that he is a barbarian and a contemptible fellow, because he does not speak correctly" (Dem. 45. 30; Plato *Apol.* 18 A).

<sup>4</sup> "Some among you have long been deemed Athenians, though they are not. And to them I say, Consider how precious is that privilege, and how worthy to be defended. You were admired in Hellas because you spoke our language and adopted our manners."—Jowett's Translation of the speech of Nicias in Thucyd. vii. 63.

speech conditions neither literature nor inscriptions afford an adequate idea. The language of literature was largely artificial and conventional, and the language of legal and political documents tended to be formal and stereotyped. The current idiom naturally varied according to the social position of the speaker.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the subject states, particularly the Ionic-speaking, Attic must have become the official dialect early in the history of the Delian league. The presence of Athenian officials, sailors, and outsettlers, as well as merchants, in large numbers, made this inevitable. As early as the fifth century traces of Attic influence appear in Ionic inscriptions in the islands. In the next century the language of some of these inscriptions is substantially Attic (Buck *op. cit.*, p. 108). In view of this evidence we are justified in assuming that a modified Attic was widely current as the popular idiom throughout the Aegean toward the end of the fifth century. Naturally Attic itself would eventually be considerably modified in the process. A paragraph in the pseudo-Xenophontic tract on the Athenian constitution makes this very clear. Enumerating the various advantages of the maritime empire the writer observes:

And again in the process of listening to every form of speech they have selected this from one place and that from another—for themselves. So much so that while the rest of the Hellenes employ each pretty much his own peculiar mode of speech, habit of life, and style of dress, the Athenians have adopted a composite type to which all sections of Hellas and the foreigner alike have contributed.<sup>2</sup>

This remarkable observation has generally been either ignored or misunderstood. Its correctness and value depend on the power of discrimination possessed by the writer, as well as on his point of view. If he means that Attic has borrowed from this or that dialect the features it has in common with each, the observation is worthless. But the fact that he speaks of borrowings from foreign languages as well as from other Greek dialects shows that he has something else in view. It was inevitable that the outsettlers, soldiers, sailors, and merchants of imperial Athens should pick up a variety of words and phrases in their associations with Greeks and barbarians. And since

<sup>1</sup> "His speech was that of the city middle class, between the effeminate city style and the rude country dialect."—Aristophanes *Frag.* 552.

<sup>2</sup> Xenophon *Constitution of Athens* ii. 8, Dakyn's translation. He suggests as an alternative rendering for *φώνην πᾶσαν* "a variety of dialects."

he is enumerating the advantages of maritime empire, it is only fair to assume that he has in mind the current speech of those classes which were most actively concerned in the growth of Athenian commerce and sea power. This late fifth-century writer, then, has observed in its beginnings the enrichment and modification which fitted Attic to become the *common dialect* of Alexander's empire. Even the literature of the period is not entirely unaffected by these influences. Mahaffy (*The Progress of Hellenism in Alexander's Empire*, p. 7) points out in some detail how distinctly Xenophon's language approximates to the *common dialect*, citing his carelessness about hiatus, his use of "stray and strange words, provincial in the sense of not being Attic," and the comparative diminution in his use of particles.<sup>1</sup>

Similar modification and mingling of dialects and languages must have been common on the frontiers of Hellas and in colonies settled by different Greek races. They are but rarely mentioned because historians did not deem such phenomena worthy of record. In Himera, for example, a mixture of the Chalcidian and Doric dialects prevailed; and the Amphilochean Argives learned the dialect of the Ambraciots who settled among them in large numbers.<sup>2</sup>

In Athens, the commercial and cultural center of Hellas during the greater part of the fifth and fourth centuries, there were abundant opportunities to become acquainted with a variety of dialects. Ambassadors from other Greek states spoke their own dialects before the Athenian senate and assembly (Dem. 16.2); and a litigant from a subject state was permitted to employ the idiom of his own city in the Athenian law courts.<sup>3</sup> It was the practice, however, to secure the services of an Athenian to prepare a speech; but the speech though written in Attic would be delivered with a marked accent. Thus

<sup>1</sup> Beside such loan words as ἀναξυρίδες and παρσάγγης, which would be used only when speaking of things Persian, Xenophon introduced into the language the Persian word παρὰδεισος ("park" or "game preserve"), which became the common word for "garden" in Greek. Other familiar loan words of eastern origin are μνᾶ, and μάστιγος (*Anab.* iv. 3. 11).

<sup>2</sup> Thucyd. vi. 5, 1; ii. 68. 5; cf. *ibid.* iv. 109. 3, 4.

<sup>3</sup> In Plato's *Apology* 18A Socrates says, "I am an utter stranger to the manner of speaking here. Therefore, just as you would doubtless pardon me, if I were in reality a stranger, for speaking in that dialect and fashion which I had been brought up to use, even so now I ask this justice at your hands."

the Lesbian charged with the murder of Herodes apologizes for his accent.<sup>1</sup>

Citizens engaged on foreign service were constantly mingling and fraternizing with subjects and allies who spoke Doric and other dialects. On occasion these allies were extremely useful. Demosthenes in urging the occupation of Pylos attached considerable importance to the aid he would receive against Sparta from the Doric-speaking Messenians (Thucyd. iv. 3. 3). His experience in Acarnania had shown how useful Doric allies could be in operations against Dorians. On one occasion he sent in advance the Messenian division from Naupactus with orders to address the Ambracian outposts in Doric. In this way he was able to surprise and inflict a ruinous defeat on the enemy (Thucyd. iii. 112. 4). And his expectations in this regard were fully realized in Pylos where his Messenian allies "invaded Laconia and inflicted great harm, because they spoke the same language with the inhabitants" (Thucyd. iv. 41. 2, Jowett's translation). But it sometimes happened that the presence of Doric allies was a distinct disadvantage. In a night attack on the Athenians at Syracuse the paeans of the Doric contingents caused no slight terror and confusion among the Athenians who imagined that the foe was right in their midst (Thucyd. vii. 44. 6). In the same battle the Syracusans became acquainted with the Athenian watchword (*σύνθημα*) and used it to escape Athenian parties when the odds were against them.<sup>2</sup>

In literature the dialects as such do not play an important rôle. Often the dialect is determined, not by the nativity of the writer, but by the class of literature. Thus Athenian writers in accordance with a literary tradition employed Doric forms freely in the choral odes of tragedy because the choral ode was first developed by Doric writers.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Antiphon v. 5. Such pleas do not occur in the other speeches of Antiphon which were delivered by Athenians, though similar pleas later became commonplaces in the mouths of lower-class Athenian litigants.

<sup>2</sup> It may occasion some surprise that Dorians could repeat even a simple watchword such as *Ζεὺς σῶτηρ καὶ νίκη* (Xen. *Anab.* i. 8. 16), without betraying themselves. The explanation is to be found in the fact that the Athenians were accustomed to hear the watchword pronounced with a Doric accent by their own allies.

<sup>3</sup> Theocritus uses both Ionic and Aeolic, as well as his native Doric, according to the character of the composition.

Modern literature offers no parallel to this practice; neither did Athenian literature develop linguistic realism to such an extent as it appears in modern literature. There are no Greek parallels to the stories of Joel Chandler Harris in the dialect of the southern negro, nor to the poems of Dr. Drummond in the broken English of the Quebec habitant. The Old Comedy was the only field in which literary realism was developed. In the *Lysistrata* and the *Acharnians* of Aristophanes we have the local Doric of Sparta, Corinth, Megara, and Boeotia. There is every reason to believe that Aristophanes, while not striving for painful accuracy, fairly represented the peculiarities of these dialects as they struck the Athenian ear.

The historians, as is well known, do not employ dialects in this way. In the pages of Thucydides and Xenophon Spartan generals address their troops in Attic Greek. But occasional Doric words are found in Xenophon's reports and summaries. Different dialects could easily be distinguished among the "Ten Thousand." Thus we are told that the Lydian Apollonides, an ex-slave, who had, in all probability, learned his Greek in Boeotia, spoke with a Boeotian accent (*βοιωτιάζων τῇ φωνῇ*, *Anab.* iii. i. 26). There is, however, no consistent attempt to reproduce these different dialects. As a rule all speeches are in Attic Greek. But the Spartan officials, Cleander and Charminus, are both represented as using the familiar Laconian oath *ναὶ τὸ σιῶ*; beyond this, these speeches exhibit no peculiarity. In an earlier conversation Cleander used *ἐξέρπει*, a word which does not occur elsewhere in Attic prose to describe the movements of an army (*Xen. Anab.* vi. 6. 34; vii. 6. 39; vii. i. 8); it may be Doric for *ἐξέρχεται*. In an indirect quotation from a conversation of the Theban, Coeratades, the Doric word *μόλωσιν* appears. It may be a mere coincidence that Xenophon happens to employ a Doric word in giving the substance of a Theban's conversation; but it is more plausible to assume that the word is quoted (*Xen. Anab.* vii. i. 33). Certain it is that these were not the only men who exhibited dialectical peculiarities. Doubtless many officers besides Apollonides spoke with a marked accent. Why, then, did Xenophon choose to give a Doric flavor to these particular speeches? It may not be without significance that none of these three men belonged to the "Ten Thousand;" and it is just possible that they, being associated almost

entirely with men of similar speech, spoke a "broader" dialect than those soldiers of fortune whose speech had been modified by their association with men from every part of Greece. Xenophon retains just enough Doric to give a hint of this difference. In the *Hellenica*, also, Doric forms occur in speeches. Pasimachus, the Lacedaemonian, is reported as saying, *ναὶ τῷ σιῷ* and *ὑμέ* (*Hellen.* iv. 4. 10). And Wackernagel (*Hellenistica*, p. 8; *Glotta* II, p. 6) has shown that *μοιχῶντα* which is put into the mouth of Callicratidas, the Spartan admiral, and *παιδίσκος* which appears in a speech of Etymocles, a Spartan, are both Doric words (*Hellen.* i. 6. 15; v. 4. 32). There is, then, considerable justification for Wackernagel's remark that "Xenophon is fond of having other Greeks speak in their own dialects." A parallel to these touches of linguistic realism is found in Plato. In the dialogues non-Attic speakers use the Attic Greek of literature. An exception occurs in the *Phaedo* (62A) where Cebes the Theban says *ἵττω Ζεύς*, "using his own dialect." Plato is doubtless preserving a characteristic provincialism of Cebes well known to his Athenian friends.

The incorporation of Spartan documents in the histories is quite a different matter. After reading speeches of Spartan kings and generals to their own people in an Athenian version one is not a little surprised to find a convention between Sparta and Argos transcribed in the original Doric (Thucyd. v. 77). But there is considerable evidence that the fifth book was not subjected to a final revision; and Bury (*Ancient Greek Historians*, p. 85) thinks it incredible that Thucydides would have admitted texts not written in Attic Greek. He could have eliminated the Doric, either by summarizing the treaty, as he has done elsewhere in the case of Attic documents, or by simply giving a verbatim Attic version, just as Pausanias gives in Attic an exact copy of an inscription which he saw in Olympia (Paus. v. 24. 3; cf. Roberts *Greek Epigraphy* I, No. 261). But the rule against "introducing into the narrative matter heterogeneous in style" was not rigidly observed. Xenophon, for example, admits into his history an intercepted Spartan dispatch in its original form (*Hellen.* i. 1. 23). Two Laconian words are found in Thucydides' report of a Delphic oracle given to the Spartans, and one in a bit of Spartan repartee. It is the significant portion of the oracle—a prophecy of famine in cryptic form—which is in Laconian;<sup>1</sup> and no matter how often it

<sup>1</sup> ἀργυρέα εὐλάκῃ εὐλαξεῖν, "else you will plough with a silver share" (v. 16. 2).

was repeated in the process of transmission and diffusion, these significant words would always appear. The Laconian word in the Spartan apothegm gives the incident a Spartan flavor as in the passages of the *Anabasis* and the *Phaedo* already discussed (Thucyd. iv. 40. 2).

But if the incorporation of non-Attic documents and phrases in the histories causes surprise, what shall we say of the occurrence of Doric forms in an Athenian decree early in the fourth century? In an Athenian version of a treaty with Corcyra, four Doric forms occur in the oath to be sworn by the Corcyreans. That this was not a regular practice is shown by a similar treaty with the Thessalians where the oath is entirely in Attic Greek (Dittenberger *Sylloge*<sup>2</sup>, Nos. 84. 108). If the Corcyrean oath had been inscribed in Doric throughout, the explanation would not be far to seek, but, as it is, surmises seem useless.

Strange dialects are always more formidable in written than in spoken form. And the average Athenian's familiarity with Homer, Herodotus, and the tragic choruses, by hearing as well as by reading, afforded an excellent basis for comprehending spoken Ionic and Doric. The use of  $\alpha$  for  $\eta$  was perfectly familiar to men who knew the tragic drama; while Doric futures and many of the pronouns and verb forms would present no difficulty to men who knew Homer. Other regularly recurring vowel and consonant changes would be easily understood in spoken form. Differences in vocabulary alone could cause any real difficulty and these are comparatively few—four in the *Acharnians* and one in the treaty (Thucyd. v. 77). Besides the general consideration that Aristophanes would not have inserted whole scenes in which the dialogue was partially in Doric if he had not expected the audience to follow closely, there is one bit of internal evidence that points to the same conclusion. When the Persian ambassador (*Achar.* 100) speaks mock Persian, Dicaeopolis professes not to understand him, but he understands both the broken Greek of the ambassador and the broad dialect of the Megarian and the Boeotian. Once, however, when the Megarian said *διαπεινᾶμες* (we are having a starving contest, *Achar.* 751) the answer of Dicaeopolis shows that he understood him to say *διαπίνομες* (we are having a drinking contest). But the joke would have fallen flat had not the audience understood the Megarian correctly.



There is no direct evidence that a Peloponnesian or a Boeotian, for example, addressing an Athenian audience avoided "provincialisms," as Professor Buck supposes. But the fact that Thucydides gives the Attic equivalent of a Doric word makes it evident that where the differences between dialects are in vocabulary, as distinguished from differences in pronunciation merely, dialects were not entirely mutually intelligible.<sup>1</sup> It is, then, not unreasonable to suppose that there would be a natural tendency to avoid words which the speaker knew were purely local. And furthermore, if, as has been suggested above, there was a real difference between the speech of the Peloponnesian members of the "Ten Thousand" and the Spartan officers, Cleander and Charminus, it probably consisted largely in the avoidance by the former of "provincialisms."

It is quite improbable that Attic was a medium of communication anywhere beyond the Ionic part of the empire before the time of Alexander. There is no mention of individuals who could speak more than one dialect, though persons who could speak more than one language are common enough. Demosthenes' order to his Messenian allies to address the Ambracian outposts in Doric seems to imply that, while associated with the Athenians, they spoke Attic or at least modified their dialect very considerably. But the passage is not conclusive, for Thucydides may be simply reminding his readers that these men spoke Doric.<sup>2</sup> Apart from a comparatively small number of words which had a special signification in certain localities there was no reason why Greeks who belonged to the communities which were politically important in the fifth and fourth centuries could not readily understand each other.

<sup>1</sup> The retort of the Spartan prisoner contains the word *ἀτρακτον*—spindle in Attic—which Thucydides immediately defines as meaning *οἰστόν*, arrow (iv. 40. 2). Both Thucydides and Xenophon define non-Greek words. Zancle is said to have received its name because its site resembled a sickle (*δρέπανον*), which the Sicilians called *ζάγκλον* (Thucyd. vi. 4. 5). Xenophon gives the Attic equivalent of *κάρανον* (*Hellen.* i. 4. 3). There is some doubt as to whether this word is Doric or Persian. See Underhill's note.

<sup>2</sup> "For Demosthenes had taken care to place the Messenians in the first rank and desired them to speak to the enemy in their own Doric dialect" (Thucyd. iii. 112. 4).